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UNCLAS SOFIA 001873

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: COALITION ALLIES BACK RIVAL CANDIDATES IN
SOFIA MAYORAL RUN-OFF

Ref: (A) SOFIA 1134 (B) SOFIA 1598, (C) SOFIA 1824

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Bulgaria's colorful former Interior Ministry Chief Secretary Boiko Borissov won the largest number of votes in the October 29 Sofia by-election, but fell short of the 50 percent needed for an outright victory. He will now face a run-off against Socialist (BSP) MP Tatyana Doncheva on November 5. Run-off elections will also be held in five other towns where no mayoral candidate won a clear majority in the first round (Ref. C). Only two out of eight mayoral by-elections were decided on the first round; both were won by the candidates of the Socialist Party. The weak and fragmented center-right continued to lose ground, with its candidates suffering defeat in Sofia, traditionally a center-right stronghold. Borissov, who has a strong chance of winning the Sofia race, said he would use this election as a springboard to a national political career. The competition among coalition partners has led to some awkward moments, but is unlikely to affect the government's stability. END SUMMARY

2. (U) Gen. Borissov, who ran as an independent candidate, garnered 38 percent of the vote, followed by Socialist candidate Tatyana Doncheva with 23 percent. Svetoslav Gavriyski, the candidate of the center-right Democrats for Strong Bulgaria ranked third with 17 percent of the vote, ahead of the candidate of the National Movement for Simeon II (NMSS), former Finance Minister Milen Velchev. Turnout in Sofia was low at just 33 percent, which analysts attributed to general disillusionment with politics and election fatigue following the June general elections (Ref. A). The fragmented center-right, which failed to name a joint nominee, lost the mayoral seat in the traditional center-right stronghold for the first time since one-party rule collapsed.

3. (SBU) Borissov, who resigned as Interior Ministry Chief Secretary in September (Ref. B), seems to take for granted

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his victory in the run-off. He offered a position in his future administration to one of his erstwhile rivals, and demanded an apology from another for comments made during the campaign. The former firefighter and bodyguard used a news conference on election night to boast about his successful work at the Interior Ministry and stress his ties with Western security services. His opponents pointed to Borissov's alleged connections with unsavory business interests. Despite these rumors, Borissov gathered support from all age groups and social strata across the political spectrum, while Doncheva, a leading Socialist reformer, failed to mobilize the conservative BSP electoral base. Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev voiced his surprise at the NMSS decision to back Borissov in the Sofia run-off, despite the fact that the NMSS and the Socialists are coalition partners at the national level.

4. (SBU) COMMENT: Borissov is the clear front-runner in the November 5 vote, especially since the NMSS said it would back him in the run-off. The former national karate champion, known for his straight talk and close ties with local media, is largely responsible for making this the most interesting mayoral race in Sofia for the past 15 years. END COMMENT
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